

Pairing Literature with Primary Sources

Feature

by Katharine Lehman and Sheila Dunn, November 2016

"There's a great tradition in storytelling that's thousands of years old...."—Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

We all love a good story. You can make history come alive through picture books. Pair them with primary sources from online digital collections and history can become more than a series of facts. Just as in a good story, students identify with struggles and accomplishments of main characters, drawing parallels to their own lives and times.

At Gates Elementary in Chesterfield County, Virginia, we transformed learning with a "story" program for fourth and fifth grade students. Inspired by Book Backdrops developed by Gail Petri at the Library of Congress (LOC), we collected picture books that correlated to our state social studies standards. Some featured historical figures like George Washington, others featured artists, scientists, and everyday people set in extraordinary circumstances. For each book, we located photographs, paintings, videos, and testimonials that transformed the stories into real experiences to relive and retell. Shared below are a few highlights of this successful unit that can be easily replicated.



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Historical Heroes

Students met Revolutionary War heroes George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette through *Revolutionary Friends: General George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette* by Selene Castrovilla.

The book conveys the bond that developed between these two historical figures. Pair this story with paintings and prints in the digital archives at LOC. Begin by exploring "A Revolutionary Partnership" at *America's Story from America's Library* (http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/revolut/jb_revolut_francoam_1.html). Students can also examine John Dunsmore's painting *Washington and Lafayette at Valley Forge*, the Currier and Ives print *The First Meeting of Washington and Lafayette*, and the Philip Haas lithograph *Valley Forge, 1777. Gen. Washington and Lafayette Visiting the Suffering Part of the Army*.

We divided students into groups and had them examine the prints and describe how the artists depicted the conditions at Valley Forge. Students imagined the qualities of leadership Washington and Lafayette needed to exhibit under such circumstances.

Historical Look at Elections

Abraham Lincoln takes on a more human persona in Karen B. Winnick's *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*. It tells the true story of Grace Bedell who wrote a letter to Lincoln advising him to grow a beard during the presidential campaign of 1860. This book is used as the example in the Book Backdrops activity in LOC's Teaching with Primary Sources: Professional Development (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/professionaldevelopment/tpsdirect/pdf/Book-Backdrops.pdf>). The PDF lists numerous primary sources including campaign buttons, photographs of Lincoln with and without a beard, letters, and political charts. Suggested teaching strategies listed under "Creating Book Backdrops Using the Inquiry Method" include



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- Use the photographs as writing prompts for a paragraph, letter, or short story
- Write dialogue by creating speech bubbles on the photographs
- Research an artifact or photograph and write a news article

Following this model, students can take a historical trip back to other presidential elections by researching digital collections at LOC and then create books, posters, or thought bubbles superimposed on candidates' photographs.

Immigration: American Melting Pot

Immigration is the oldest continuous story in our country's history. The plight, perseverance, and ingenuity of early immigrants are portrayed in *The Matchbox Diary* by Paul Fleischman. We introduced the concept of immigration with the 1902 photograph "Emigrants Coming to the 'Land of Promise'." In small groups, our students used

LOC's Primary Source Analysis Tool (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/>) to analyze, reflect on, and question what they observed. Each student contributed opinions and information about the photograph. They listened to the suggestions made by others, collected ideas, and shared with the whole class. Applying their current knowledge of the world, some students identified the women as Muslim because their heads were covered. Additional research solved the riddle this picture presents for students today. For more primary sources on immigration see the Themed Resources page at LOC (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/>).

Bring History to Life

Picture a library filled with bright balls of yarn with 5th grade boys and girls knitting with pencils, wooden skewers, or perhaps a few knitting needles. After we read Deborah Hopkinson's *Knit Your Bit: A World War I Story* and viewed Red Cross posters from World War I, our students were motivated to try their hands at knitting. They recognized the pain soldiers felt in wet trenches without warm socks to combat trench foot. Photographs showing students knitting inspired our students to keep practicing weeks after the story had been shared.

Travesty of War

The tragic story of the Holocaust is told in Karen Hesse's *The Cats in Krasinski Square*, the story of one little girl's brave deed to help the Resistance sneak food into the Warsaw Ghetto. Pair this story with Tomek Bogacki's *Champion of Children: The Story of Janusz Korczak*, about a doctor who ran a Jewish orphanage and video footage of real heroes of the Holocaust such as Irena Sendler, a Polish social worker who smuggled many orphans out of the Ghetto (<http://www.irenasendler.org/>).

These books are only a few of the ones that can be paired with primary sources, and history is not the only subject that benefits from this practice. For science, check out Jennifer Bern's biography of Albert Einstein, *On a Beam of Light*. For math, try Joseph D'Agnesi's *Blockhead: The Life of Fibonacci*. Use your online search skills to locate photographs, news articles, and video clips to pair with these books and others. Through expert pairing of stories real and imagined, we can construct experiences that stimulate new learning. We found that our students responded more favorably to all subjects when they had visuals or hands-on experiences. Using picture books in the upper elementary grade levels has become a part of the library lesson plan at Gates. For additional resources and titles, visit the Google Site created for our 2016 VAASL presentation on "Pairing Literature with Primary Sources" at <https://sites.google.com/a/ccpsnet.net/pairing-literature-with-primary-sources/>.

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